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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ABUJA 001832

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DOE FOR CAROLYN GAY

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: CHANGES IN BENUE STATE

REF: A. ABUJA 1750

- 1B. ABUJA 1740
- 1C. ABUJA 1739
- 1D. ABUJA 1593

Classified By: CDA Robert Gribbin for reasons 1.4. (b & d).

11. (C) SUMMARY. Poverty, and the lack of electricity and education are still rampant throughout Benue State, but new Governor Gabriel Suswam claims he is going to change that. Rural development, education and capacity building are the priorities Suswam says he will focus on during his tenure. Some progress is already underway on plans for solar-powered schools, road construction, and the possibility of foreign business partnerships. Additionally, the almost entirely new State Assembly, lead by newly elected Speaker Terseer Tsumba spoke about judicial and legislative reform, including a request for guidance from the United States. END SUMMARY.

HIGHLIGHTS OF MAKURDI

12. During an August 7-8 visit to Makurdi, PolOff met with members of the Benue State government including representatives from the executive, legislative and judicial branches. In addition to the Governor, 21 out of 29 State Assembly Representatives are new, and all are talking about big changes and great progress. New Governor Gabriel Suswam says that, if he can improve the lives of the people of his state, Benue could once again thrive peacefully and might rightly justify the state motto (still displayed on a crumbling sign in the middle of Makurdi) "Food Basket of the Nation." PolOff noted two positive signs: the working streetlights and evidence of road construction. Despite Benue State's severe electricity shortage, even worse than in many other parts of Nigeria, the streetlights work because they are all solar-powered. Furthermore, both days in Makurdi PolOff saw construction crews repairing roads - an unfamiliar site in much of the country.

THE NEW GOVERNOR

13. (C) Born and raised in Benue State, Governor Gabriel Suswam says he is genuinely committed to bettering his community, although at times he seems to enjoy the spotlight just as much. Suswam has a good reputation among many of the citizens with whom PolOff spoke. According to subordinates and colleagues, he works until after midnight and starts again early the next morning. Tsumba summed up the attitude of the new leadership saying, "we may only have a few years

and it is worth losing sleep if we can make a difference." However, there were initially some petitions filed against Suswam after the April 2007 elections, reportedly due to ethnic differences. Benue State has been plagued with ethnic and tribal violence with neighboring Taraba State as well as within its own borders for over fifty years (reflets B and D). Within Benue State, the Idoma and Tiv tribes have battled over political power and control of land for decades (reftel A). Suswam, a Tiv and member of the PDP met with traditional rulers and local community leaders to convince both the Idoma-speaking people and ANPP opposition party members that he would work to unify the state and represent all its people. The petitions were later dropped.

¶4. (C) Governor Suswam told PolOff his priorities will be rural development, education and economic development. During his campaign, Suswam also promised the people of Benue better access to their state government. PolOff witnessed two examples of this new "open door" policy. The first was Suswam's informal, no-nonsense attitude. Protocol (which in Nigeria often approaches royal proportions) was almost absent; Suswam, rather, prefers to introduce himself casually and get right to business. According to those who have met and worked with him, this is standard. The second example was the newly renovated House of Assembly building which now has a an entrance and section dedicated for observers from the general public, thanks to funds provided by the Governor.

RURAL DEVELOPMENT

¶5. (C) Suswam said rural development will remain his top priority. He attributes the pervasive poverty in Benue to the collapse of the rural economy, which he blamed on

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deteriorated infrastructure. Suswam promised to address the inadequacy of roads in Benue, and the several construction crews observed by PolOff suggest he is serious about the problem. The Governor also said transportation routes must be created and maintained to enable farmers to move their crops, and for goods to reach them. He claims to be partnering with local governments and councils to bolster the rural economy with roads, agricultural development through cooperatives, and the provision of electricity.

EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

¶6. (C) With education as his second priority, Suswam said his administration will strive to ensure all children from primary to university level become computer literate in order to catch up with and compete with the global community (COMMENT: A rather inflated goal given that one third of Nigeria's children do not even attend school. END COMMENT.) The Governor described a partnership project with Microsoft to supply computers and software for future public schools in Benue. The designs for these schools, which will be entirely solar-powered (to compensate for electricity shortages), are currently being drawn up, with each to have an ICT lab outfitted with computers donated by Microsoft.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

¶7. (C) The Governor said he wants Benue State to develop partnerships with outside investors, NGOs and foreign governments to expand and diversify the economy. Suswam mentioned a U.S. company, Tradeline, which is working in partnership with the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), and is currently exploring building an ethanol manufacturing plant in Benue which would use the widely available cassava and sugar cane as fuel. Representatives from Tradeline were in Benue conducting site surveys during PolOff's visit. Also in Benue to meet with Suswam, was the South African High Commissioner to Nigeria, who promised in a speech to continue encouraging more investors to come to Benue State. According to Suswam, South African

industrialists plan to invest in Benue by creating electric power plants using the abundant coal deposits in the area. Suswam hopes these plants will help provide a minimum of 800 megawatts of electricity to begin meeting the needs of the people in rural areas.

NEW STATE ASSEMBLY SPEAKER

18. (C) Terseer Tsumba is not only the new Assembly Speaker, but also served as campaign manager for Governor Suswam. Tsumba spoke about the issues that concern him most in Benue,

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especially electricity. Benue State is not connected to the national grid, so must rely on its own limited resources for power. Tsumba has plans to develop hydro-electric power plants along the banks of the Benue River, though he acknowledged this is a plan that has been discussed in the state for years. Tsumba's second priority is building the capacity of the legislature and judiciary. He admitted that many grievances exist within the justice system in Benue State including an inexcusable delay in prisoners receiving a fair trial (reftel C). The Speaker hopes for resources from the State and Federal government to develop additional courts in the Local Government Areas and training programs for new justices and lawyers. Tsumba spoke of the legal system with high regard and expressed interest in receiving technical assistance. Tsumba hopes to offer training to assemblyman, justices and lawyers in Benue State. Ideally, Tsumba wants to develop and conduct yearly conferences and workshops, with guidance from the U.S., in order to better educate the men and women in power in Benue.

BENUE'S FUTURE BRIGHT?

19. (C) COMMENT: Although Benue lacks basic infrastructure, and the majority of its people live in austere conditions, the new government seems to have instilled some hope for a better future. Only three months since inauguration, it is difficult to determine if this administration is really going to make changes or if its leaders are just inflating their reputation with talk of idealistic goals. Nigerian State Governors do not have a great track record when it comes to implementing plans for progress, but by choosing issues such as electricity, roads, education and access to local

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government, Governor Suswam has focused on the areas that can have a direct impact on peoples' lives. If he can succeed in improving even one of these areas, he will have done more than most. END COMMENT.

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